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The difference between 'bullying' and 'everyday life'.

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<http://theconversation.com/the-difference-between-bullying-and-everyday-life-27861>

Bullying: Why Meaning Matters

A few weeks ago a survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that bullying was the number one concern of young people in Australia, displacing their concerns for the environment.

This is surprising because the incidence of bullying does not seem to be increasing ([10.1007/s11218-011-9158-y](#)).

Definitions of bullying

Perhaps the meaning of the word bullying has expanded in our community. Taking psychological or medical words which have specific definitions and incorporating them into our everyday speech is widespread. Nobody is sad anymore, we are depressed; if someone is neat and tidy they are OCD; nobody gets a cold anymore, it's the flu.

Perhaps bullying is now so broadly defined and even carelessly used it has lost the specific meaning it had. So what is bullying? That depends on who you ask.

Researchers' definitions

Researchers say bullying is a complex social relationship problem which is deeply embedded in our society.

The behaviour of the person bullying has to have three fundamental properties. First, the person must intend to harm the victim; bullying can't be accidental. Some researchers even go as far as saying that the person must feel harmed and if not, it is not bullying.

Second, the bullying behaviour is usually repeated. A one-off spiteful remark would not be called bullying but if it is constantly repeated, it would be.

Third, bullying is not fighting among equals; there is a power imbalance in the relationship.

Kids', teachers' and parents' definitions

In one study I did ([10.1007/s11218-014-9254-x](#)) I asked groups of kids and parents and teachers what they thought bullying was. All three groups said that an imbalance of power was central to saying what bullying was, different from fighting.

One student said “fighting.. it’s like both of them putting stuff on each other where bullying is just ..you know, I’m going to pick on you but you can’t fight back because I’m bigger than you.”

A teacher said bullying was “an intimidation thing by an individual or group of people attacking one or a group people”, while a parent described bullying as a “form of abuse, psychological abuse or physical abuse.”

All three groups however, did not mention that to be considered bullying the behaviour would usually be repetitive. Although the intention of the bully to cause harm was mentioned in all of the groups, in the parent group there was some disagreement with one parent saying “the person doing the bullying may not actually see themselves as being a bully”, which was countered by another parent saying “oh no, bullies know what they doing.”

Forms of bullying

There are also different forms of bullying. The one that usually comes to mind is physical bullying where a stronger/older person or group beats up on a helpless victim.

Verbal bullying is being spiteful, calling people nasty names, or relentless teasing. Relational bullying includes starting untrue rumours, gossiping and excluding people.

The most recent form of bullying is cyberbullying where bullying is done by electronic means such as text messaging, videos on the Internet, in blogs, on social media sites and in chat rooms.

Why meaning matters

Because student bullying is usually carried out without adults being present it is difficult for teachers and parents to know about it. Even when adults are present the behaviour can be very subtle and difficult to recognise. If we add this to the fact that we often differ in what we think bullying is, it makes the situation very difficult to both prevent and to manage.

So it is important if we use the word bully that everybody agrees on the meaning. We need to distinguish between aggression, bullying, harassment, nastiness. I think it is useful to think of aggressive behaviour as the umbrella term, with bullying as one type of aggression distinguished by intention, repetition and an imbalance of power. Harassment is one type of

bullying, where a person's race or gender or sexuality is the cause of bullying. Nastiness is people being mean to each other but without necessarily repetition or the imbalance of power.

Why we need to agree is this determines how we manage the harmful incident. If two kids are fighting we usually punish both of them and try to teach them to solve their differences more constructively. If one kid is bullying another kid, I don't think it is fair to punish both of them. The victim did not do anything wrong and often punishment doesn't change the bully's behaviour.

Conflict in our lives can be functional or dysfunctional. Bullying is always dysfunctional for the victim, the bully and the witnesses. We can't avoid conflict and disagreement but we don't have to abuse our power to hurt others.